Experiencing Life as a Soldier

Rock D. Woodstock

The Natick Soldier Center (NSC) Greening Program initially involved only Soldier Systems Center employees but has since expanded its reach to U.S. Army Tank-automotive and Armaments Command (TACOM), the Edgewood Chemical Biological Center and other elements within the U.S. Army Research, Development and Engineering Command (RDECOM). This article profiles the author's program experience at Fort Riley, KS, earlier this year.

Greening team at Fort Riley (from left): Karen Hackett, Merlin Osborn, Jeff Robertson, SFC Sam Newland, Rock Woodstock and Van Lopez.

As a contracting officer with TACOM-Rock Island (RI), IL, I receive many e-mail messages during the course of a normal business day. Most messages deal with routine contracting issues, but one message really caught my attention. It sought applicants for something called the "TACOM Greening Program."

Sponsored by the TACOM Learning Center and executed by NSC's Operational Forces Interface Group (OFIG) (see sidebar on Page 48), the TACOM Greening Program offers selected individuals the opportunity to travel to Fort Riley to observe an Army unit training in the field. Personnel applying for the program must provide a short personal biography and a brief, written statement about why they want to participate and what they hope to learn from their experience. Applicants must also be able to march 3 miles carrying a 60-pound pack.

A few weeks after I submitted my application, four other TACOM employees and I were selected to participate as embedded observers in a mechanized infantry battalion conducting live-fire exercises Jan. 26-30, 2004. OFIG would provide all the personal field equipment we would need — the same battle-tested gear used by today's Army worldwide. The NSC also provided two noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to prepare us for the field and guide us through our "greening" experience. Our initial contact was Greening Program Noncommissioned Officer-in-Charge SFC Sam Newland.

My fellow participants were Karen Hackett, Chemical Defensive Equipment Specialist; Van Lopez, Bradley Vehicle Fleet Technical Writer; Merlin Osborn, TACOM-RI Range Target Specialist; and Jeff Robertson, Anniston Army Depot Engineer.

Gearing Up

Newland greeted us after we landed at the Manhattan, KS, airport. The jump wings on his chest and Ranger tab on his shoulder indicated that he was well-versed in combat operations and gave us the impression we were in very capable hands. After arriving at Fort Riley, Newland explained the next few days' events.

> We were to engage and destroy the enemy. On contact, we expected the enemy would disengage from the fight because of our technical superiority. Intelligence estimates indicated we could expect the enemy to use chemical weapons if the battle turned against them.

We then went to dinner, where he answered our questions and got to know our group a little better. He said that while our job was to learn the host unit's mission, our presence gave the unit the opportunity to experience operations with embedded civilian noncombatants.

Sunday morning brought wind, snow and colder temperatures. Our group went to the 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Brigade (1st Bn., 41st Inf. Bde.) headquarters. Newland led us into the auditorium at battalion headquarters and issued each person a large canvas bag, backpack with frame and a pair of the heaviest boots I had ever seen. We opened our bags and spread ponchos on the floor. We then placed the bag's contents on the poncho and conducted an equipment inventory to accept responsibility for the Army property we would use for the next week. The bag contained uniforms, extreme weather clothing and accessories, a helmet, sleeping bag and body armor. Newland answered our questions and guided us through the process of converting the "one-size-fits-most" equipment into gear correctly sized for each participant. Then we put our body armor on, loaded the remaining equipment into our backpacks and "rucked up" for the first time. Between the bulletproof vest and the pack, the total load weighed about 60 pounds. I felt like a slow-moving target as I lumbered out of the building carrying my heavy personal equipment load.

The vehicle crew removed the tarp covering the turret. All uncovered surfaces of the Bradley Fighting Vehicles (BFVs) were glazed by the ice storm that struck central Kansas the day before. U.S. Army photos by Rock D. Woodstock.

Show and Tell

Our group reassembled at 5:30 a.m. the next day, but our departure was delayed because of an ice storm that passed through the area the previous night. The delay gave us a chance to play cards and enjoy a Meal, Ready-to-Eat (MRE) for lunch. Some MREs are tasty — some are not. Most Soldiers have preferences and often barter meal components to customize diets to their personal tastes.

Eventually, two companies from our host battalion assembled and we departed for the training facility. After arriving, our group settled into large open-bay barracks and met with our assigned infantry squads. The Soldiers introduced themselves, identified their assignments and demonstrated their weapons functions. Assault rifles and machine guns are the tools of their trade, and they appeared very knowledgeable and extremely confident in themselves and their missions. Each Soldier took great pride in demonstrating the gears' special features and allowed our group to try on and get familiar with the equipment. The combination of night vision goggles and infrared lasers was very impressive.

> Even with our ear protection on inside the BFV, the 25mm Bushmaster sounded like a sledgehammer was pounding against the side of the vehicle hull. The pounding indicated that our gunner was engaging enemy targets.

Gunnery

After dinner, the senior NCOs conducted a briefing covering our training exercise objectives. My squad was assigned the task of heading the assault to protect the flank during the main attack. We were to engage and destroy the enemy. On contact, we expected the enemy would disengage from the fight because of our technical superiority. If necessary, we were to pursue and deny the enemy the use of a nearby village to regroup and reorganize. Intelligence estimates indicated we could expect the enemy to use chemical weapons if the battle turned against them.

The following day dawned with clear skies and a brisk wind that put our extreme weather gear to the test. The Extreme Cold Weather System garments were very effective and proved invaluable during our training at the Fort Riley range. The actual live-fire exercise was conducted during both daylight and nighttime hours. As a safety precaution, our group only took part in the daytime operations and watched the night-fire exercises from the range control tower. Every Soldier we talked to was impressed with the 25mm Bushmaster cannon and how effective it was in urban warfare.

Throughout our visit, we explained our role as support and provisioning civilians. We discussed TACOM's mission and the equipment development and fielding process. We also listened to and noted individual Soldier

concerns and issues regarding equipment design, configuration and condition. We examined the vehicles and personal weapons being used by the 1st Bn, 41st Inf. Bde. and noted a wide disparity in the condition and configuration of equipment in fielded units. The close interaction with the host unit gave our team the chance to identify new or unmet equipment requirements.

Information Exchange

Newland and OFIG Enlisted Liaison SSG Raul Lopez documented individual equipment issues for discussion back at NSC. The host unit welcomed the chance to discuss these issues. Our team also used Soldier discussions to promote Web-based TACOM support available to Army customers. This line of communication is limited because not all Soldiers have laptop computers and many only have limited access to command-sponsored computer centers. We established new lines of communication through the Army Knowledge Online Internet-based threaded discussion forum to follow up on issues identified during our discussions.

After a good night's rest, and a remarkably satisfying breakfast at the field dining facility, my squad gathered its equipment, loaded into a BFV and drove to the range for the daytime live-fire exercise. Even with our ear protection on inside the BFV, the 25mm Bushmaster sounded like a sledgehammer was pounding against the side of the vehicle hull. The pounding indicated that our gunner was engaging enemy targets. Our assault was coordinated with the other squads as we alternately advanced and provided cover for other units.

We arrived at the village — a target complex identified by hay bales and mock ruins — and engaged the enemy.

The following morning, we thanked our hosts for the experience of a lifetime and returned to our rooms on post. After washing and sorting our personal equipment, we returned the loaned gear to Lopez and reverted back to our civilian alter egos. Fantasy camp was over, but what an experience it was!

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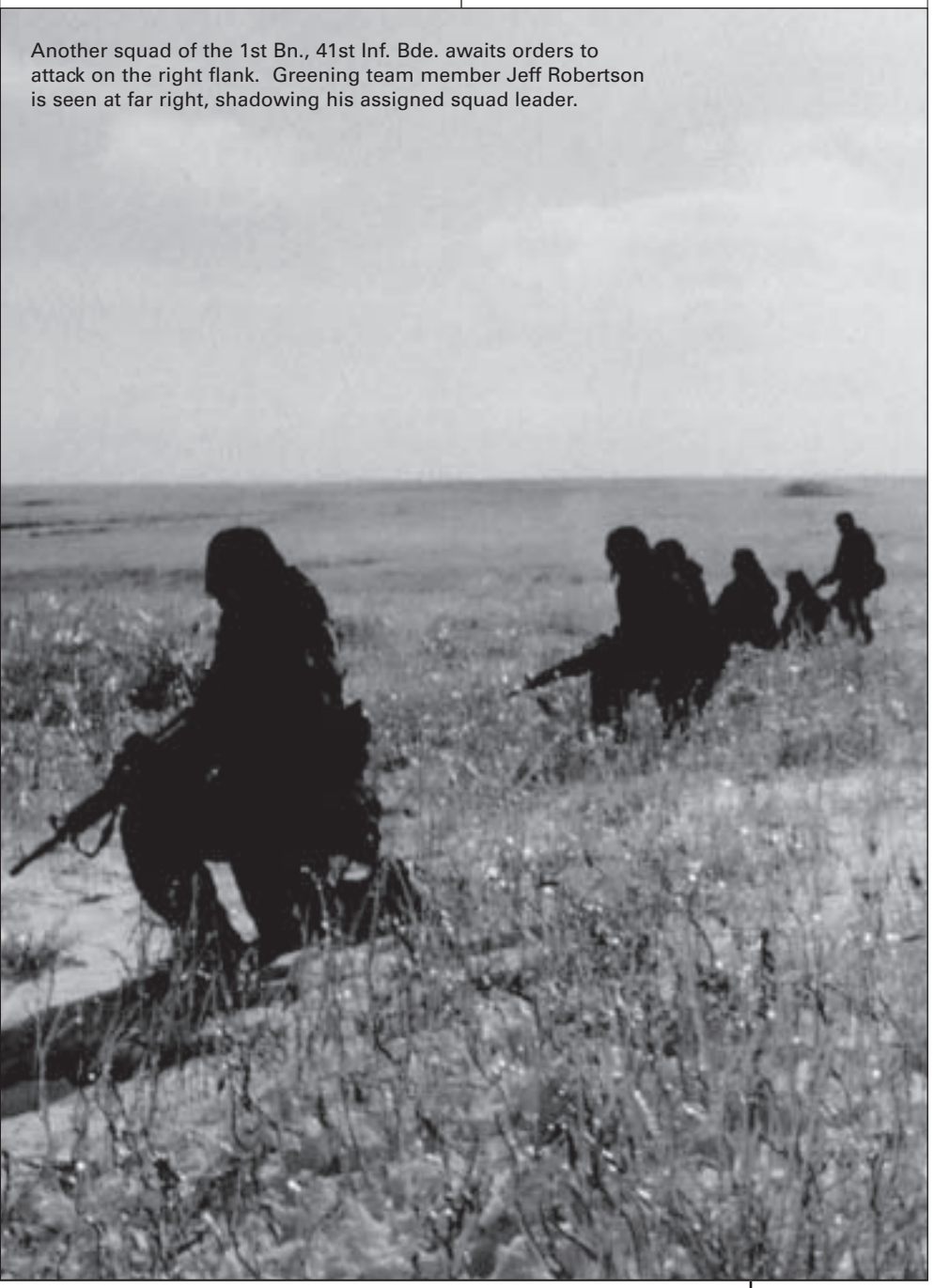

Another squad of the 1st Bn., 41st Inf. Bde. awaits orders to attack on the right flank. Greening team member Jeff Robertson is seen at far right, shadowing his assigned squad leader.

Operational Forces Interface Group (OFIG)

To obtain customer feedback, NSC uses the OFIG team to provide myriad advantages and services to the center. First and foremost, the OFIG team has an understanding of our Armed Force's needs and the ability to "talk its language," enabling them to gain the respect and understanding of the military personnel NSC supports. This understanding is gained through OFIG's having actual military experience and extensive interaction with military personnel and units. OFIG's two Active Component NCOs round out and complement this organizational team's structure.

OFIG responsibilities include the following:

- NSC point of contact (POC) for the coordination of installation visits.
- Field evaluations.
- Technical exhibits.
- Command overview briefings.
- Liaison activities.
- Providing NSC Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs) worldwide.

QRTs can be specifically structured to fit mission needs, but normally consist of engineering psychologists (responsible for developing questionnaires, conducting interviews, collecting and analyzing data and preparing OFIG reports) and project officers/engineers. An OFIG representative acts as the single POC and leads these teams. To learn more about OFIG's capabilities and programs, e-mail them at **ofig@natick.army.mil**.

For more information about the TACOM Greening Program and other NSC programs, go to **http://www.natick.army.mil/soldier/ofig/content.htm**. The Greening Program is one of several RDECOM programs that provide project officers, scientists and engineers field experience and an opportunity to interface directly with Soldiers. These civilians take the experiences from "A Day in the Life of a Soldier" back to their laboratories and centers, incorporating that experience into the research and development of the materiel and weapons our Soldiers use. Ultimately, this experiential process and interaction provides improved equipment for our troops.

After debarking from their BFVs, both squads approach a rally point in file formation at a full run.